



Youth Engagement in Political Parties
29-30th May 2014, Yangon
Seminar Report

MYANMAR MULTIPARTY
DEMOCRACY PROGRAMME

1. INTRODUCTION

Historically, youth plays an important role in the forefront of politics in Myanmar. Students and youth of the country – whether that was against the colonial rule or against the military regime – led the liberation movements of the country. However, decades of repressive rule has generally discouraged youth from participating in politics. However, in recent years in the wake of improvements in freedom of expression and a greater focus on politics and democracy in the public sphere, re-establishment of political parties and parliament, interest in politics has been growing among the younger generation. Despite this increasing interest, youth currently plays a very limited role in political parties in Myanmar.

The Myanmar Multiparty Democracy Programme, initiated by the Danish Institute for Parties and Democracy, has conducted consultations with political parties and many other stakeholders to understand the current landscape in Myanmar with regard to youth in political parties. During the consultations, the engagement of youth in political parties was identified as a key priority and the political parties have a keen interest in furthering the role of youth in the parties. Based on the findings, a three year project on youth in political parties has been developed.

2. THE OBJECTIVE AND CONTEXT OF SEMINAR

On 29th and 30th May 2014, DIPD in Myanmar launched the three year project on youth in political parties, which is one of the core components of the Myanmar Multiparty Democracy Program (MMDP). The launching seminar was entitled “Youth Engagement in Political Parties” and was held in cooperation with the Innovative and ActionAid Myanmar. The seminar aimed to enhance dialogue and cooperation among youth in political parties across the political spectrum and enhance the capacities of youth and youth wing to practice their democratic functions. The seminar convened about 120 youth leaders from 50 political parties and key civil society organizations from across the country.

On the first day, His Excellency Union Minister U Soe Thein delivered a speech on “Role of Youth in Myanmar Political System”. The Minister said, “They [youths] also should offer a hand to work in the political arena as a step towards the country’s development.” He also mentioned that the government is considering to establish a Ministry for Youth Affairs. Finally he invited the DIPD Senior Adviser Hanne Lund Madsen and the MMDP team to visit his office for further talks.

The event is the first time for youths from political parties of Myanmar to have such a forum on youth engagement in political parties. “This topic and this audience are so special that I accepted the invitation to give a talk in this seminar though I am quite busy these days,” said Ko Ko Gyi of 88 Peace and Open Society, while he was giving a talk on “Myanmar youth in politics – why now!”

In consultations with political parties it became clear that promoting the role of youth in political parties is a high priority where the former regime’s repressive rule disenfranchised youth from politics, despite their historical leadership in liberation movements of Myanmar.

In the seminar the participants shared challenges and ideas among youth in political parties in Myanmar and they also benefitted from the experiences from two youth politicians from Denmark on building strong youth wings and inter-party youth dialogue.

Mr. Morten Dahlin and Ms. Ditte Søndergaard moreover shared tools for communication with the youth and in particular on how to make politics relevant to the youth. The seminar offered a unique forum through which youth party members and other youth had the opportunity to exchange and discuss issues of shared concern and national importance and engage in dialogue on key challenges and opportunities in further deepening Myanmar's democratic processes. The background document of the seminar was the DIPD guide "How to Build a Youth Wing", which has been translated into Myanmar language and distributed to the seminar participants.

CC Nawja of Kachin National Congress for Democracy (KNCD) expressed his appreciation of the seminar: "What has been presented here is very good. The seminar has created a place for political parties to meet together. It is like a political ground for youth. Thank you to the programme management team of DIPD to arrange the Q&A sessions, which give us a chance to have interactive discussions."

"Thank you for organizing this event. It is like "taking us into the light out of the darkness," said Salai Mg Mg Win, Assistant General Secretary, of Asho Chin National Party (ACNP).

On the first day of the seminar, a number of presentations regarding the six chapters mentioned in the youth guide were presented and panel debates involving both Myanmar and international speakers were conducted. On the second day, more in-depth workshops on the seminar themes were conducted to identify next steps both for the parties individually and jointly and for the youth project of the Myanmar Multiparty Democracy Programme.

3. IMPORTANT POINTS DISCUSSED AT THE SEMINAR

Walking through the seminar's agenda, the youth discussed the many existing challenges and issues they are faced with and then they considered the possible solutions to overcome these challenges and issues.

First of all, one of the issues which most of the youth in the political parties are concerned about is lack of political knowledge and skills. They pointed out the fact that "Political Science" should be taught at Myanmar universities and the decision on the admission to this subject should not be limited to the marks of the matriculation exam. They also suggested that basic democratic principles and rule of law should be included in the curricula of secondary education to make youth more informed citizens to the benefit of the country. The issue of party financing, regulation and accountability was also discussed with reference to international experiences where youth wings on an equal basis can receive financial support for the political trainings for youth and capacity building purpose.

Another measure which was considered to encourage youth engagement in political parties would be to ensure that their jobs and employment opportunities are not at risk by joining a political party. It was noted at the seminar that the private companies do not like their employees to be affiliated to political parties, thus depriving youth of employment opportunities if they are members of political parties. They also noted some legal constraints on youth participation in politics, highlighting the requirement that they have to declare "No participation in party politics" when they are admitted to a university or taking a job.

Furthermore, the youth noted during the seminar that most parties do not have youth departments or youth sector in the party structure. The role of youth is not well reflected in the party policies either. Therefore, some participants suggested that the parties should have a reserved space only for youth and develop youth-friendly policies and strategies specifically targeting youth. Political parties can also create space for youth members to meet and talk with the incumbent MPs of their parties so that they can learn the hands-on experiences of lawmaking.

Youth proposed that the key actions political parties should take in order for youth to be more engaged in political parties are firstly acknowledgement of the role of youth in the party and secondly awareness-raising among the general public. In the first instance, youth is a tremendous resource for the parties and moreover youth constitute a large part of the voters. Youth will feel encouraged to join political parties when there are opportunities to earn decision-making roles and their contribution is acknowledged. A participant at a workshop said, "We are not in decision-making positions because the senior party members often do not have confidence in us. And most parties don't have specific department for youth and the party leadership tend not to utilize the resources and skills youth have." At the same time the importance of ensuring a constructive dialogue between generations within the parties were underlined.

Participants also mentioned that youth sometimes feel discouraged to participate in politics because their family and community they live in would not let them due to the fear that being politically active could still imply some sort of repression. If the participation of youth in politics is to be understood by the public as a normal task of a citizen, not as something dangerous, political parties need to raise more awareness about politics among the general public. Only then, youth will gain courage to have a dream for political careers and feel encouraged to be engaged in political parties in order to work for the development of Myanmar. Youth also considered how they could prepare and build capacity to take on new roles and bigger responsibilities within their mother party. Especially the need for encouragement of young women in politics were mentioned.

Furthermore, the youth noted that it would be good if they were more included in discussions on issues of national concern and allowed to participate in peace dialogues/talks by setting up a youth platform in peace-making process.

Finally, trust building among youth should be undertaken through youth political dialogues and interparty forum to facilitate cooperation among youths of different political parties. It is high time for unity among youth of the country. There is a need to arrange trainings and organize youth party dialogue meetings on neutral ground. This is where the Myanmar Multiparty Democracy Programme can play a role.

Daw Nan S Ke Moe of Shan Nationalities Development Party (SNDP) voiced her idea: "I would like events like this to happen more in the future because it is difficult for political parties to organize such events and they cannot sponsor this kind of event. This event is the first time for youth of political parties and thus gives time to share and learn from each other. I hope we can move on to the next steps in next events and discuss action plans for what and how we can cooperate in future".

4. CONCLUSION

The seminar was a success due to the good cooperation between the political parties, the youth participants, the speakers from Myanmar, the youth leaders from Denmark and the partnership organizations – ActionAid Myanmar and the Innovative.

However, it is the first time for youths from political parties of Myanmar to have such a forum on youth engagement in political parties and there is a long way ahead. The support and cooperation of the government and political parties is crucial for enhancing youth engagement in Myanmar.

The seminar gave ideas which each of the participants will bring back and share within their parties. Moreover, due to the good media coverage of the seminar in local media the issues raised are now known to more stakeholders. Finally, the Myanmar Multiparty Democracy Programme will continue the dialogue and action planning with the political parties and with youth in political parties on the themes related to capacity development and training.

This report is shared with Presidential Ministry of the Republic of Myanmar, political parties and civil society organizations in Myanmar.

Appendix One: Seminar Programme

Appendix Two: Speakers at the Seminar

Appendix Three: Participants at the Seminar